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Reaching and over-reaching: Justifying today's actions in terms of yesterday's

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But consider the differences.

The Bay of Pigs was run by the CIA, whose franchise included major covert actions, rather than by national security officials working out of the White House basement, where their stated role is to advise the president on foreign policy.

In 1961, the interested officers of the administration were informed, though not all were enthusiastic. That Congress was not adequately briefed then is a major reason why laws were passed mandating that key legislators be kept abreast of future such operations.

Upset as we were at Castro then, there was no mass national fury against him like that provoked by the Ayatollah's followers who held our hostages, defiled our flag and picked over the bones of our countrymen for the TV camera after they crashed in the desert.

Castro did not, to our knowledge, underwrite an international campaign of terrorism that indiscriminately took the lives of innocent people.

There were no laws or executive orders

then to require notice to Congress or to forbid dealing with terrorists, arms trading with Iran, supplying weapons to the Nicaraguan contras.

And, as mentioned, there was a president who stood up and took all the blame, thus heading off any public spectacle of finger-pointing and buck-passing.

So Mr. Reagan's communications director, Pat Buchanan, didn't bring up Bobby Kennedy. But he is the man who compared the Iran arms operation to the underground railroad of pre-Civil War days. While it assuredly was not he who mentioned Mr. Kissinger in any favorable light, he had the imagination to suggest a parallel between this fiasco and Franklin Roosevelt's ordering U.S. destroyers to hunt Nazi submarines before World War II, and the Americans who ran guns to Palestine in 1948.

Ollie North, he said, is "the Billy Mitchell of his generation" — Mitchell being the Army flier (who didn't plead the Fifth Amendment) who was court-martialed for his outspoken public advocacy of air power, and later got a special posthumous Medal of Honor for being right.

But it is Jerry Falwell who has made the longest leap, defending Mr. Reagan in the current mess by predicting that he will be remembered as "the greatest president since Abraham Lincoln." No historical research is needed to comment on that one. In the spirit of the season, I will pass it by.

In their desperate search for precedents to justify the Iran arms-contras cash extravaganza, White House defenders have compared Ollie North to every undercover operator from Henry Kissinger to Harriet Tubman. Strangely, none of them has mentioned Bobby Kennedy as a model.

Mr. Kissinger may have secretly arranged the U.S. opening to China, but he never cut a deal to ransom prisoners held by a national enemy. Ms. Tubman may have helped run the underground railroad to hide slaves escaping north, but she never paid ransom, either.

But Bobby Kennedy did, and at this season it is appropriate to recall and compare the campaign he waged to free the men captured by Fidel Castro's forces at the Bay of Pigs.

There were not three or six of them, but 1,113. Twenty-four years ago this Christmas week, they came home — to their adopted home, Miami. They were Cubans who had fled their homeland, then been trained by the CIA for the abortive effort to return and overthrow Castro.

Unlike certain more recent presidents, John Kennedy accepted blame for the fiasco although the planning had been done and first steps taken under Dwight Eisenhower.

"There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan," President Kennedy told reporters. "I am the responsible officer of the government."

There was nothing about not knowing the details, no effort to avoid admitting a mistake, no public hint of blaming his subordinates.

In private, he agonized over the fate of the men left on the beach. On his behalf, his brother Robert, the attorney general, oversaw lengthy, nominally private efforts to negotiate their release. Bobby led the effort to raise \$53 million in food and medicine and \$2.9 million in cash as ransom.

And Castro, more than 20 months after the Bay of Pigs landing, sent the prisoners to Florida.

There are superficial parallels aplenty between that ignominious episode and what has happened between Washington and Tehran (and Tel Aviv and Miami and Beirut and various other places) during the Reagan administration.

Like the recent operations, the Bay of Pigs was plotted in secret but known to many collaborators abroad. Both exercises eventually failed. Ransom demands were made and met. There was and is controversy over whether the Americans involved were heroes.